

TOPIC SHEET 4
COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A. INTRODUCTION:

This topic focuses on the skills necessary to be an effective communicator – both in the written and spoken word.

B. ENABLING OBJECTIVES:

4.1 Identify effective listening techniques.

4.2 Identify effective writing techniques.

C. TOPIC PREPARATION:

1. Read: There are no materials to be read prior to this topic.

2. Complete: There are no assignments for completion prior to this topic.

D. REFERENCE: None

E. SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS:

These readings are suggested as additional sources of information. Although not required, you are encouraged to review them to broaden your perspective of the lesson.

1. SECNAVINST 5216.5 (Series) Department of the Navy Correspondence Manual

2. Shenk, R. (1997) The Naval Institute Guide to Naval Writing. Annapolis, MD; Naval Institute Press.

F. INSTRUCTION SHEETS:

1. TS 4 Communication Skills

2. OS 4-1 Communication Skills

3. ES 4-2 Listening Skills

4. ES 4-3 Listening Skills Self Assessment

5. IS 4-4 Listening Barriers

6. IS 4-5 Just Plain English

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**OUTLINE SHEET 4-1
COMMUNICATION SKILLS****A. OUTLINE OF INSTRUCTION:****1. Introduction**

As a Chief Petty officer, your overall effectiveness in the Chain of Command is primarily based on your ability to communicate. This ability consists of good listening, speaking, writing and reading habits. The objective of this lesson is to familiarize you with the basic skills necessary to listen, speak and write effectively.

2. Listening Exercise**3. Communication Process**

Many of you have seen this depiction before. The process consists of a message being sent and received. It can be verbal or nonverbal. Communication does not always flow accurately from sender to receiver. It is important to identify and remove barriers to effective communication. A barrier is anything that interferes with the communication process. They can be physical or psychological.

4. Effective Listening

The communication skill of listening is something that we often take for granted. We don't receive much training in listening, but with practice, we can improve our listening skills.

One of the first steps is to assess how well we listen.

5. Five skills that will help improve your listening skills.

Attend

Acknowledge

Invite

Summarize

Ask

a. Attend – looking, listening, tracking

- Give full attention by listening
- Stop further activity which might be distracting
- Turn body towards the person who is speaking
- Give eye contact if possible
- In general, we are putting our concerns aside for the moment and giving the other person “the floor”
- As we listen we take in as much as we can
- Look at the nonverbal
- Listen to the sounds
- Notice what the other person discloses

b. Acknowledge – showing interest and respect for what others say.

- To acknowledge may mean a nod, an “uh-huh,” or making an interpretive statement
- In listening, the key information at any moment is where the other person’s energy is, not where yours is

c. Invite – more information

- For this skill, you simply say or do something that encourages the other person to continue talking spontaneously

d. Summarize – to ensure accuracy. This skill helps you ensure understanding.

- If we say “I understand what you are saying,” that may be untrue or sound arrogant.
- Summarize the message to demonstrate you accurately understand.

How to summarize:

- Repeat in your own words what you think you heard the speaker say.
- Don’t add or subtract from the message.
- Ask the person talking for confirmation.

e. Ask – open questions to gather or fill in missing information.

- Open questions begin with “W” and “H” (Who, When, Where, How).
- Open questions are the most effective kinds of questions.
- Closed questions limit or attempt to direct responses.
- Avoid “Why” questions.

6. Listening Barriers

7. Effective Writing

As a newly selected Chief Petty Officer, you should learn to excel in writing. You will be tasked with preparing letters, messages, memorandums, evaluations, instructions. A Chief Petty Officer whose writing needs little revision is an asset to the Division Officer, Department Head and Executive Officer. Your skills as a writer will be scrutinized by seniors and subordinates alike and will affect the way you are perceived as a leader.

The following six steps will help you prepare written communications and a speech outline more effectively.

Step 1: Analyze Purpose and Audience

Is your purpose to direct, inform (or question), or to persuade. The purpose determines what you should emphasize. Directive emphasizes what to do, informative highlights how, persuasive focuses on the way something should be done.

You also need to identify your specific objective. What do you want to happen as a result of the communication.

After you sort out the purpose, think about the audience on both the receiving and sending ends.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Am I promising something I can deliver?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- Am I consistent with previous policy?
- What tone is appropriate?
- How much does the audience already know about the subject?

Step 2: Conduct Research

The objective is to either solve a problem or determine if a problem exists. As you research, be aware of your own biases. Use important data even if it conflicts with your philosophy.

Step 3: Support your ideas

Use sources of information that back up your arguments such as:

- Examples
- Statistics
- Testimony
- Comparisons

Step 4: Organize your writing

Effective writing consists of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The introduction captures the reader's interest and announces the purpose of the communication. The body presents your ideas in proper sequence. The conclusion summarizes the main points stated in the body and provides a smooth ending.

Step 5: Write and edit a first draft

Use your outline as a guide. Here are some things to remember as you prepare the first draft:

- Avoid mystery stories
- Put the one most important sentence in by the end of the first paragraph
- Rely on everyday words
- Eliminate wordiness
- Write actively

Step 6: Receive feedback from others

Read your draft several times. Take a detached approach and be critical of your writing. When you have done everything possible to improve your draft, have someone such as a fellow Chief or your Division Officer review your work.

Tell your reviewer you want a critical evaluation of your work and would appreciate suggestions for improvement. Accept whatever criticism without arguing or defending yourself. Decide how you can use the comments to improve your writing.

8. References

- a. SECNAVINST 5216.5 Series, DoN Correspondence Manual
- b. Naval Institute Guide to Naval Writing
- c. BUPERSINST 1610.10 Series, Navy Performance Evaluation and Counseling System
- d. SECNAVINST 1650 Series, Navy and Marine Corps Awards Manual

9. Summary

The ability to communicate is a skill; like other skills, this ability is increased through hard work and practice. The information presented in this topic is a review of the fundamentals required for effective communication.

Your job as a Chief Petty Officer depends on how well you communicate. The ability to present your thoughts and ideas indicates to others you can accept greater responsibility.

**EXERCISE SHEET 4-2
LISTENING SKILLS**

After listening to the reading of the short story, answer the following statements:

- | | | |
|--|------|-------|
| 1. The child drove the car. | True | False |
| 2. The child was female. | True | False |
| 3. The child was shot. | True | False |
| 4. The parent called the police. | True | False |
| 5. The police arrived in the blue car. | True | False |
| 6. The parent was female. | True | False |
| 7. The parent cried, "I need help. | True | False |
| 8. The student cried, "I'm shot." | True | False |
| 9. The uncle arrived in the blue car. | True | False |
| 10. The ambulance arrived in five minutes. | True | False |
| 11. Both parents were at home. | True | False |

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EXERCISE SHEET 4-3 LISTENING SKILLS SELF ASSESSMENT

Directions: Try to be completely honest with yourself in this exercise, as it will not be compared to anyone else's, and it is intended only as an aid to your own measurement. For each of the fifteen statements at the left, score your listening ability according to one of the four bolded column headers at the right, by circling it.

Then tally your score:

50-60 is Excellent;

40-50 is Above Average;

less than 40-Improvement Called For.

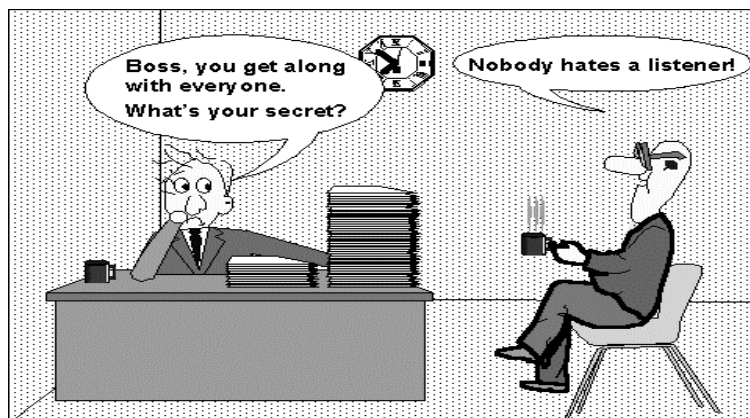
	Always	Usually	Seldom	Never
1. Do you let people finish what they're trying to say before you speak?	4	3	2	1
2. Can you listen non-judgmentally, even if you do not like the person who is talking?	4	3	2	1
3. Do you listen fully, regardless of the speaker's manner of speaking (does he have an accent or speech impediment)?	4	3	2	1
4. Do you give the speaker appropriate eye contact and non-verbals to indicate that you are listening?	4	3	2	1
5. Do you restate what has been said and ask if you understood?	4	3	2	1
6. Do you try to avoid excessive use of "I", "me", and "mine"?	4	3	2	1
7. Do you stop what you are working on and give your full attention to the speaker?	4	3	2	1
8. Can you listen attentively even if you think you know what the person is going to say?	4	3	2	1
9. If the speaker hesitates, do you wait and encourage them - instead of jumping right in?	4	3	2	1
10. Do you withhold judgment about an idea that is presented until the communication is complete?	4	3	2	1
11. Do you gather all the facts before responding to a problem?	4	3	2	1
12. When you are uncertain about a communication, do you ask questions?	4	3	2	1
13. Do you actually pay attention to what is being said rather than faking attention?	4	3	2	1
14. Do you make certain that a person's rate or rank has no bearing on how well you listen to him or her?	4	3	2	1
15. Do you work hard at overcoming distractions that may interfere with good listening?	4	3	2	1
Total				

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INFORMATION SHEET 4-4 LISTENING BARRIERS




Introduction This section describes barriers we meet when trying to listen.

Benefits of Listening Listening is the highest compliment one can pay, for it shows respect, builds trust, and cements relationships:



Listening is the most important part of communicating



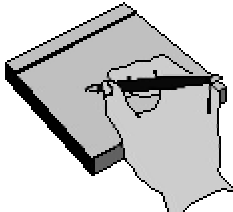

Barriers we meet However, it's hard to listen because of the barriers we meet:

<u>Barrier</u>	<u>Description</u>
<u>Environment</u> 	Poor physical conditions hinder concentration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ventilation. • Temperature. • Lighting. • Noise. • Acoustics. • Seating arrangement.
<u>Speaker's image</u> 	Speaker loses credibility because of— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate preparation. • Inappropriate attire. • Unconvincing stage presence. • Clumsiness. • Poor use of gestures and eye contact.
<u>Speaker's words</u> 	Speaker alienates the audience with— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bad diction. • Profanity. • Jargon. • Pompous expressions. • Stilted language. • Long-winded presentation.

Listening Barriers We Create

Introduction This section describes listening barriers we create.

Barriers we create Besides meeting listening barriers, we also create them.

<u>Barrier</u>	<u>Description</u>
<p><u>Thought speed</u></p> 	<p>Listener takes in words faster than the speaker delivers them. Example: Average rates for--</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking--125 words per minute. • Listening--500 words per minute. <p>Time lag gives the listener extra time to—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn thoughts elsewhere. • Allow distractions. • Only hear half of the speaker's words.
<p><u>Bias</u></p> 	<p>Listener tunes out because of the speaker's--</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status. • Point of view. • Appearance--clothing, jewelry, hair style. • Accent. • Ethnic or religious background. <p>Instead of listening with an open mind, the listener--</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refuses to hear the speaker out. • Looks for flaws. • Prepares rebuttals. • Attacks the speaker.
<p><u>Bad habits</u></p> 	<p>People listen poorly because they—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take too many notes--miss key points. • Listen for facts only--fail to see the big picture. • Daydream--show lack of commitment. • Slouch--reduces alertness. • Pretend they're listening--stems from laziness.
<p><u>Emotions :</u></p> 	<p>Some folks stop listening if the speaker's remarks upset them. Leads to—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional reactions. • Clouded judgment. • Overreaction.

Practice Concentrating To improve concentration, try watching serious TV programs, attending lectures, or participating in a discussion group.

Overcoming Listening Barriers

Introduction This section explains how to overcome listening barriers.

Overcoming Barriers To overcome listening barriers follow these steps:

<u>Step</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Description</u>
1	Bite your tongue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Count to ten. Listen with an open mind. Don't— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> React immediately or emotionally. Use negative body language such as yawning or rolling your eyes.
2	Listen for the main point.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on main ideas. Take only a few notes.
3	Resist distractions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sit upright and look at the speaker.
4	Use time gained from thought speed to advantage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read between the lines. Watch body language. Rephrase the speaker's words. Frame questions.

Listening with your eyes To listen with your eyes, use these techniques:

<u>Technique</u>	<u>Rationale</u>
Look at the speaker's whole face.	Avoids staring.
Watch the speaker's lips.	Enhances hearing.
Focus on one eye, then the other.	Increases attentiveness.
Occasionally shift eyes.	Relieves tension and avoids staring.

Passive listening Watching TV or otherwise listening without responding is passive listening. Communication is one-way, with no exchange of feedback. Disadvantages:

<u>Speaker sends</u>	<u>Listener can't</u>
Correct message.	Understand.
Incorrect message.	Seek clarification.
Unclear message.	Interpret accurately.

When to listen passively Passive listening has some value. At times a response isn't expected. You may simply lend an ear to one who wants to--

- Get something off his chest.
- Use you as a sounding board.
- Ask a rhetorical question (one not requiring a response).

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**INFORMATION SHEET 4-5
JUST PLAIN ENGLISH****WRITING AND REVIEWING STAFF WORK*****If you're the writer,***

Talk a project over with your reviewer at the start. Learn the points and emphasis to use.

Write a draft. Keep in mind your reader's knowledge and interest. Do your homework and head off questions.

Revise ruthlessly. Have you been clear and accurate? Try to find fault with your work.

Try to see the reviewer's changes from his or her viewpoint. Be grateful for the times you were saved from blundering.

If you're the reviewer,

You must show your people that you want plain English. Circulate and post this pamphlet, give it to newcomers, include copies in local writing guides.

Discuss a project with the writer before he or she starts it. Plan it together. If you're in the middle, know what the boss wants.

Don't make the writer parrot your pet expressions. They can keep a subordinate from developing a natural style.

Whenever possible, suggest changes and let the writer make them. Give reasons for major changes.

Avoid making changes just to feel you've left your mark. Tinker only to prevent real damage.

JUST PLAIN ENGLISH, September 1981, Revised November 1995, was written in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (N09B), 2000 Navy Pentagon, Washington, DC 20350-2000

COMPACT WRITING

Suspect wordiness in everything you write. Quarrel with the need for every paragraph, every sentence, every word. The longer you take to say things, the more you blur your ideas. When deadlines permit, let your writing rest for a day and then rewrite it. And rewrite it. To help you hunt for wordiness, here are some common sources that are easy to spot and easy to fix.

Doublings

Avoid writing about a project's *importance and significance* when *importance* will do. Avoid writing about your *gratitude and thanks* when *thanks* will do. Pairs of words with similar meanings add needless bulk to writing. Whatever the differences between *theory and concepts*, for example, they aren't worth calling attention to if you just want to give a general idea.

"It is"

No two words hurt naval writing more than the innocent-looking *"it is "*. They stretch sentences, delay your point, encourage passive verbs, and hide responsibility. Unless *"it"* refers to something mentioned earlier, write around *"it is "*. *"It is necessary that you revise ruthlessly"* becomes *"You need to revise ruthlessly."* And the roundabout *"It is realized"* becomes the straightforward *"We realize"* or *"I realize."* Spare only natural expressions like *"it is time to"*

Less common but no less wordy are the cousins of *it is*, *there are* and *there is*. *"There are two alternatives mentioned in the report"* becomes *"The report mentions two alternatives."* Similarly, *"There is a helicopter pad on the ship"* becomes *"The ship has a helicopter pad."* You can avoid most of these weak beginnings with just a little rewriting.

Legalese

Avoid legal-sounding language like *therein*, *herewith*, and *the undersigned*. Try *there*, *here*, and *I*. Such pompous and needless language doesn't give writing added authority. It simply shows that the writer's style, and perhaps the writers thinking, is outdated. Let a directive's number or a letter's signature carry the authority; you risk committing bloated bureaucratic bombast if you try to put that authority in your language.

Smothered Verbs

Weak writing relies on general verbs, which take extra words to complete their meaning. When you write a general verb like *is*, *give*, *hold*, and *have*, see if a nearby word will make a more specific verb. Here are some common smothered (and unsmothered) verbs: *"The committee members held a meeting (met) to give consideration to (consider) the plan. They made the decision (decided) to give their approval to (approve) it."* Make use of (use) specific verbs. Avoid diluting the action words in your sentences.

"That" and "Which"

Look for *thats* and *whiches* to cut from your writing. Often those words don't help meaning or flow. Sometimes you can just drop either word: "We believe that the changes will help." Sometimes you will have to rewrite slightly: "a system *which is* reliable" becomes "a reliable system."

"the _____ion of"

Shorten words ending in -ion whenever the context permits. Instead of saying "I recommend the adoption of the plan," say "I recommend adopting the plan." And instead of saying "We want the participation of the command," say "We want the command to participate." Words ending in -ion are verbs turned into nouns. Writing is shorter and livelier when it favors verb (action) forms over noun (static) forms.

Wordy Expressions

Wordy expressions don't give writing impressive bulk; they litter it by getting in the way of the words that carry the meaning. Verbs and nouns do the real work; long linking phrases don't deserve the attention they receive. So simplify these sentence stretchers. In parentheses are the simpler forms of four common wordy expressions: *in order to (to)*, *for the purpose of (to)*, *in the near future (soon)*, *in the event that (if)*. these wordy expressions and others appear in the list of SIMPLER WORDS AND PHRASES.

Hut 2 3-4 Phrases

Though you should cut needless words, sometimes you can go too far. Avoid building hut-2-3-4 phrases, long freight trains of nouns and modifiers. Readers can't tell easily just what modifies what or when such trains will end. You may have to use official hut-2-3-4 phrases like "Air Traffic Control Radar Beacon System," but you can avoid creating unofficial ones like "*computer programs advance information*." Instead, write "*advance information on computer programs*." And for "*rapid operational equipment distribution*," use "*rapid distribution of operational equipment*." By increasing the number of words a little, you increase reading speed a lot.

Specialized Terms

Like hut-2-3-4 phrases, the overuse of specialized terms is false economy. Avoid your job's shorthand with outsiders, and use it no more than you must with insiders. Spell out uncommon abbreviations and acronyms the first time they appear. If they will appear only twice, a good rule of thumb is to spell them out both times. The goal is to keep readers from pausing to decode your shorthand any more than they must. Of course, spelling out a strange abbreviation may not help much. Are you any closer to understanding SDI by knowing it means Systematized Dynamic Interface? You'll avoid using terms others don't understand by testing everything you write as though you were the reader.

OLD AND NEW BEGINNINGS TO EXECUTIVE ORDERS

OLD: By virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution of the United States of America as President of the United States of America, it is hereby ordered as follows

NEW: As President of the United States, I direct

NATURAL WRITING

To avoid a bloated bureaucratic style, make your writing more like speaking. This isn't a call for copying every quirk of speech down to grunts and ramblings, and granted some people don't speak very well. Still, because readers "hear" writing, the most readable writing sounds like people talking to people.

Begin by imagining your reader is in front of you. If you're writing to many different people and none in particular, picture one typical reader. Then write with the techniques below--the best of speaking.

Once you've written a draft, read it aloud. If you wouldn't say it in person, don't say it by mail. Take the time to revise. For most of us, good writing really means good rewriting. It's worth the effort. A single naval letter is likely to be read by many people as it goes up for signature in one activity and down for action in another. Work to help the many who must read your writing. If you don't sweat, your readers will.

Respect Plain Words.

Go out of your way to use small words. Issue directives, don't promulgate them. Start things, don't *initiate* them. Think of the city fellow in those old western movies who overdressed to impress the folks at the ranch. Overdressed writing fails just as foolishly. Readers may know utilize means use and optimum means best, but why force them to translate? You sell yourself in your writing. Come across as a sensible person, someone who knows that good English is plain English.

Use Personal Pronouns.

Avoiding natural references to people is false modesty. When speaking for your activity, as in a letter signed by direction, use we, us, or our. When speaking for yourself--if you're in charge--use I, me, or my. In either situation, use you and your to bring the reader into the situation.

You can write poorly even with personal pronouns. (Too much of we and you can obscure the subject and no amount of them can overcome confused thinking.) But without personal pronouns, you're doomed. Attempts to avoid them are often elaborate and inefficient: "The position of this command is" for "our position is" or "it is understood" for "we understand" or "notify this office" for "notify us" or "all addressees should" for "you should." Research has confirmed many times that personal pronouns improve readability. The importance of this fact goes up as reading skills go down.

We in the Department of the Navy can take a lesson from "We the people" in the Constitution. In spite of that honorable past, many of today's naval writers think personal pronouns hurt objectivity and encourage chumminess. A chummy style has no place in our writing, but neither does an untouched-by-human-hands style. Both extremes lack the natural dignity of ordinary English.

Besides, readers aren't fooled if you write "it is planned" for "we plan" or "it is requested" for "we request." They know your activity is behind the planning and requesting. Personal pronouns merely acknowledge the obvious. -And where some doubt may exist, the pronouns clear it up.

Try Some Contractions.

Contractions link pronouns with verbs (*we'd*, *I'll*, *you're*) and make verbs negative (*don't*, *can't*, *won't*). The second kind keeps readers from skipping over *not*, a special advantage with instructions. Contractions are appropriate in less formal writing situations such as this pamphlet. Yet even when your final product will be very formal, you can still use contractions in drafts to help you write naturally. The point is that if you're comfortable with contractions, your writing is likely to read easily. And because the language is clear, you can spot holes in your thinking that need to be filled.

If contractions feel out of place, you may need to deflate the rest of what you say. In the next sentence, something has to go, either the opening contraction or the remaining formality: "It's incumbent upon personnel at all echelons to conserve energy." Written naturally, the sentence might read "It's your job to save energy." Contractions without guilt! That's the goal.

Prefer Short Transitions.

Prefer short, spoken transitions over long, bookish ones. Use *but* more than *however*, *also* more than *in addition*, *still* more than *nevertheless*, *so* more than *consequently*, or *therefore*. The shorter transitions help set the right tone, a natural one for the rest of what you say. Save the longer transitions for variety. And, yes, occasionally, you can start sentences with words like *but*, *so*, *yet*, and.

Ask More Questions.

Reach out to your readers now and then by asking questions. A request gains emphasis when it ends with a ?. In a long report, a question can be a welcome change. Hear how spoken a question is? One is hidden in the next sentence: "Request that this command be notified as to whether the conference has been rescheduled." Written as a question, the sentence is short and direct: "Has the conference been rescheduled?"

Keep Sentences Short.

For variety, mix long sentences and short ones, but average twenty words or less. Though short sentences won't guarantee clarity, they're usually less confusing than long ones. Now you needn't count every word. Try the eye test: average under two typed lines. Or try the ear test: read your writing aloud and break up a sentence that you can't finish in one breath.

TO-THE-POINT WRITING

Much naval writing follows a pattern of organization that is easy on writers but hard on readers. Most of us write the way we think, by leading up to our conclusions. From a reader's perspective, it is the clue-by-clue pattern of mystery stories. A more helpful pattern is that of newspaper articles, which open with the most important information and taper off to the least important.

Open With Your Main Point.

What's the one sentence you'd keep if you could keep only one? That sentence is your main point, your bottom line, your "so what." Get right to it. Whenever you can, start with that sentence, in a paragraph by itself for added emphasis.

Give commands before reasons, requests before justifications, answers before explanations, conclusions before details. Readers need to know your main point early so they can appreciate the relevance of whatever else you say.

If no single sentence stands out, you may need to create one to keep from wandering aimlessly. Occasionally, as in a set of instructions or a reply to various questions, all your points may be equally important. In this case, start with a sentence that tells your readers what to expect: "These are the training quotas for FY 02."

Delay your main point to soften bad news, for example, or to introduce a controversial proposal. But don't delay routinely. Readers, like listeners, are put off by people who take forever to get to the point. In most cases, plunge right in.

To end most letters, just stop. When writing to persuade rather than just to inform, you may want to end strongly-- with a forecast, appeal, or implication. When feelings are involved, you may want to exit gracefully--with an expression of good will. When in doubt, offer your help or the name of a contact.

Downplay References:

The hardest way to start a letter, but the best way, is to get right to the point. The easiest way to start a letter, but the worst way, is to open with a reference ...or two or three. Beware. Reading slows with every glance from the text to the reference caption. Justify such distractions by using only necessary references. Try drafting a letter without references much in mind. That way you're likely to use fewer of them than you would by starting with a list. Many letters need no references at all. Others are complete with a reference to only the latest communication in a series. Reading first paragraphs that overuse references is like driving in reverse, through alphabet soup.

Make forward progress right from the start by subordinating references:

Not: Reference (a) proposed double coding 21 Navy billets. The rationale was that these billets then would have more candidates. This proposal is supported.

But: We support double coding 21 Navy billets, which reference (a) proposed.

Or: We support the proposal in reference (a) to double code 21 Navy billets.

Or: We support the referenced proposal to double code 21 Navy billets.

(This example applies to single-reference letters.)

This up-front pattern works for other types of writing. Staff papers can begin with a "highlights" or "main thrust" section. Similarly, long electronic messages that would normally end with summaries can open with them instead.

Use Short Paragraphs.

Important ideas are swamped in long paragraphs. Cover one topic completely before starting another, and let a topic take several paragraphs if necessary. But keep paragraphs short, down to roughly four or five sentences. Long paragraphs will divide where your thinking takes a turn. By adding white space, you make reading easier.

Call attention to lists of items or instructions by displaying them in subparagraphs. And when topics vary widely, use headings to catch your reader's eye.

Write Strong Sentences.

The four examples under "*Downplay References*" illustrate ways to write emphatic sentences. The "Not" example wrongly gives the reference a major role as the subject of an independent clause. The remaining examples give the reference its proper minor roles first in a dependent clause, then in a phrase, and finally in a single adjective. As emphasis on the reference decreases, emphasis on important ideas increases.

Emphasis also increases on words that begin and end sentences. The next sentence stresses soon:

The course will be given to middle and senior managers soon.

Soon would receive less emphasis if placed in the middle of the sentence. If soon were the opening word, its emphasis would be compounded by its placement and the reversal of normal word order. Begin and end sentences with any words you like, but keep in mind that you can make important ideas stand out by positioning them strategically.

Keep Lists Parallel.

In lists, stick to one pattern. By avoiding interruptions, you set up expectations that make reading easy. Violations of parallelism occur most often when writers mix the following:

Things and actions,

Statements and questions

Active instructions and passive ones.

The five headings under TO-THE-POINT WRITING form a list of active instructions. The list would lose its parallelism if instead of "*Keep Lists Parallel*" we used things (*Parallel Lists*) or passives (*Lists Must Be Kept Parallel*). The trick is to be consistent. Make ideas of equal importance look equal.

If you've mastered this bold kind of parallelism, go on to subtle forms that involve balancing words with words, phrases with phrases, and clauses with clauses. You'll find them discussed in any grammar text.

ACTIVE WRITING

Write actively most of the time. Over 75 percent of the verbs in magazines and newspapers, the kinds of writing we like to read, are active. Many naval writers, however, make 75 percent of their verbs passive. As a result, much of our writing is wordy, roundabout, and sometimes downright confusing.

Put Doers Before Verbs.

To spot passive verbs, look for any form of *to be* plus the past participle of a main verb (that's a verb usually ending in *-en* or *-ed*). Forms of *to be*: *is, are, was, were, am, be, being, been*. Passive verbs, then, look like these: *was inspected, has been left, is being anchored, may be chosen*.

Sentences written with passive verbs are wordy and roundabout. They reverse the natural, active order of English sentences. In the passive example below, notice how the receiver of the verb's action comes before the verb and the doer comes after:

Active: The skipper inspected the ship.
(doer) (verb) (receiver)

Passive: The ship was inspected by the skipper.
(receiver) (verb) (doer)

Besides lengthening and twisting sentences, passive verbs often muddy them. Active sentences must have doers, passive ones are complete without them:

Nominations must be approved beforehand. By whom?

Plans are being made. By whom??

You will be notified. By whom???

To avoid most passive verbs, find the doer of the verb's action and put it before the verb. By leading with the doer, you automatically will follow with an active verb:

Supervisors must approve nominations beforehand.

We are making plans.

I will notify you.

Now and then you can avoid a passive verb without rearranging the sentence. Simply change the verb or drop part of it:

Your request ~~has been received~~ arrived.

Annapolis is ~~located~~ in Maryland.

Write passively now and then--when you have good reason not to say who or what does the action. This situation may occur if the doer is unknown, unimportant, obvious, or better left unsaid:

Doer obvious: Presidents are elected every four years.

Doer perhaps unimportant: The parts have been shipped.

This isn't a license to kill. When in doubt write actively, even though the doer might seem obvious or unimportant. You will write livelier sentences (not, livelier sentences will be written by you). The point is make use of passives deliberate and infrequent.

Write Direct Instructions

Instructions deserve special attention because we write so many of them, often with so many passives. When describing how to do something, talk directly to your readers by leading with verbs. Imagine someone has just walked up to you and asked you what to do. (This is not a new way to turn passive sentences into active ones. A doer, you, will be understood or stated in front of the verb.)

All safes will be checked. ⇨ Check all safes.

Each dial must be spun. ⇨ Spin each dial.

To improve instructions further, apply these neat techniques:

- State rules before exceptions.
- Stress important points.
- Choose exact words.
- Say who does what.
- Give examples for difficult ideas.
- Divide processes into small steps.
- Use headings, subparagraphs, parallel lists.
- Answer likely questions.
- Test your material.

Rewrite to avoid ambiguity.

Until Murphy's Law is rescinded, you must write so you cannot be misunderstood

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